

ONCE...AND ONCE AGAIN

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*Stories are the creative conversion of life itself into a more
powerful, clearer, more meaningful experience.
They are the currency of human contact.*
— Robert McKee

My heart beat a swift staccato when I saw it—an exquisitely illustrated copy of Hans Christian Andersen and Brothers Grimm fairy tales just like the one I owned as a child. Lost somewhere in the dim recesses of my past, but here, among row after row of hand-me-down books, I rediscovered it at last—and remembered.

Incandescent yellow light bathes the walls, washing to a brilliant puddle that reflects it back to me. Bundled into bed, snug and sheltered, I crack the pages once again and read by the glow of that nocturnal noon—long after I’m supposed to be sleeping. Safe and warm, I venture into realms unknown, to illusory lands where life is not safe, and yet malevolence lies vanquished in the end. Alongside the hero, my heart quickens—whether in fearsome encounters, or menacing forests.

There is magic here that flashes out and reshapes me.

A musty smell mingles with this living memory as I comb the book’s contents for best-beloved tales. Just as she had always been—last on a lengthy list—is *The Snow Queen*. I smile, sigh, and settle in to read.

Gerda and Kay. The Snow Queen’s alarming appearance and Kay’s abduction. A steadfast Gerda intent on liberating her well-loved playfellow with the sliver of glass lodged in his eye and a ball of ice in his heart.

Then the story turns. Dark.

Dagger to the throat dark.

Flickering through the leaves of the book, I find blood, death, terror, and even cannibalistic witches. Cinderella’s sisters cutting off

toes and heels to fit too-large feet into glass slippers in order to seize the prince for themselves. Children like Hansel and Gretel, Snow White, Red Riding Hood—bullied, hunted and threatened by the grownups charged with their care, or abandoned in dark and daunting forests; helpless before the very strangers they are cautioned against. These were the stories I had loved as a child?

How could I disremember this?

Yet, another memory shimmers before my mind's eye.

Lively little girls grab pillows, blankets—and a tantalizing fairy tale tome. Shushing begins, excited voices fall away, and an expectant hush fills the room. A single voice begins to speak—strong, sure, and smiling. All these years later, I can still hear it. Rich as butter, it drizzles over me as I sit spellbound by spoken story. Lyric comes to life, splashing vivid images across mind's-eye; fright and delight vie in my heart as I listen. And I—along with every child in the room, and across the sea, and throughout time—take my place within the chain of the tale which begins, “Once upon a time...”